

MISSION ESPADA AND ITS FASCINATING ACEQUIA SYSTEM

By Carol Bass Sowa
Today's Catholic

This is the fourth in a multi-part series.

SAN ANTONIO • While the impressive architecture of missions San José and Concepción gives a glimpse of the glory days of the mission system in Spanish Colonial Texas, the rural settings of missions Espada and San Juan allow one to step back in time and see the area surrounding them much as the early inhabitants did.

Attendees at the US/ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) International Scientific Symposium were treated to a tour of all four missions on May 31. Second stop for the group led by archaeologist Susan Snow of the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park was Mission San Francisco de la Espada.



ICOMOS visitors enter Mission Espada's iconic Moorish doors.
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For the past eight years, Snow has been the liaison between the National Park Service and the Archdiocese of San Antonio regarding historic preservation issues. “We are working towards a common goal,” she said, “and that common goal is preserving the missions so that they continue to be not only the heart of San Antonio, but the driver of the San Antonio you see today.”

“Mission Espada has everything,” said Snow. This includes an entire irrigation system that has never ceased functioning, a church, ruins of a granary and, 25 miles to the south, the mission ranch, Rancho de las Cabras (Ranch of the Goats). Heading towards the river from the mission, she related, there is a series of five lime kilns that were used to burn lime for the mission's construction. Two are still visible and extant.

Mission Espada is built of sandstone, limestone and bricks, and Snow noted that there is more brick in this mission site than any of the others. The reason for this was its distance from limestone. Much closer, 10 miles to the south, sandstone was readily available from the Elmendorf area.

Like all of San Antonio's missions, Espada has had to deal with shifting clay soil creating cracks in its walls. These have been repaired in the past and have continued to be monitored for several years now, she said.

One of Espada's iconic features is its Moorish-influenced stone doorway. The stones were originally cut with a grander church building in mind, Snow explained, but the lack of labor caused this plan to be scaled back. The mission's Native American residents would stay awhile

but, when things were conducive to their hunter/gatherer lifestyle, would depart. What had been planned as the sacristy became instead the mission church and the stones intended for a larger door were rearranged to fit the smaller one as best they could.

“One of the unique things that we want people to understand about our missions here in San Antonio,” said Snow, “is that they are a living, breathing, continuing to evolve culture of San Antonio. They are not a static historic site.”

She explained that the missions, especially Espada, have a very active descendent community. Every two years since 1998, the National Park Service (NPS) has held a program called “Faces of the Missions” in conjunction with the Institute of Texan Cultures. People from the community are invited to bring in their historic photographs which are digitally saved, copied and put into panels for exhibit. “They get to keep their photos; they get to keep their heritage,” said Snow, “but they get to share it with us as well.”

Mission San Juan also has a strong descendent community, Snow noted, and there is an increasingly active community at San José as well, with four families that claim descent from craftsman Pedro Huizar. All four families still live around Mission San José.

The NPS has also started some oral history projects, she related, and three years ago History and Genealogy Day was initiated, during which descendent families and historical societies from San Antonio display the work they have done regarding family histories. “With no judgment,” Snow adds. “They’re allowed to tell their story the way they want to tell their story.” This has helped improve goodwill between the families and the Park Service.

Since there are no federally recognized tribes here, there is no prescribed legal way to deal with those claiming continuity to the missions. “So we allow everyone to express their opinion,” said Snow, “although the material that we put out in our interpretive signage, etc., has to be a little more rigorous.” She highly recommended seeing the award-winning film, “Gente de Razón” (“People of Reason”), shown daily at the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park visitor center located at Mission San José, to learn more about cultural continuity at the missions.

“The Espada Acequia here is the oldest existing acequia that has never ceased to run,” said Snow. “It has continuously operated since 1745.” She noted that this system of irrigation ditches which watered the mission’s farmlands is still an active ditch company of which the National Park Service is a shareholder. They recently provided financial help by hiring the “America Youth Works” program to do a thorough cleaning of the silt build-up.

In a ditch company, she explained, owners of the land are responsible for making sure their part of the ditch is kept clean, but as the land changed owners over the years, a number of owners did not know of this responsibility and a series of public meetings were held to make owners aware. “We have been able to educate them not only about the process,” said Snow, “but give them a sense of pride in their piece of the ditch.” It was a way for the park to get to know their neighbors even better, she added, and make them feel more engaged.

While Mission Espada is a National Historic Landmark because of its completeness, the Espada Acequia and Espada Aqueduct are a National Engineering Landmark as well, Snow told the ICOMOS visitors. From a site overlooking the stone arches of the Espada Aqueduct, she explained that Espada Dam (a weir dam, just big enough to lead water from the San Antonio River into the earthen acequia ditch) is located two miles to the north. The water gradually flows downhill, following the topographic lines of the natural terrain.

When the acequia crosses a creek, their waters mingle together and then go on their way. However, when a body of water is encountered that is too big, it creates a “blow-out,” at which point the builders of the acequia would find a place where the two bodies of water were at the same elevation and create an artificial oxbow. These earthen ditches were patched with stone only if necessary, she added.

When the Espada Acequia encountered Piedras Creek, the creek’s flow was too strong, necessitating the building of the aqueduct which remains standing today. It was designed using the natural rocks of the creek to form a bulwark so that when heavy flow strikes it, the water is diverted into two passages. A later flood channeling measure, said Snow, now prevents really forceful water from hitting the old stone structure, helping preserve it.

“Everything you see with the exception of the hydraulic lime cap is original,” said Snow of the structure that lifts the acequia over Piedras Creek, noting that it is exciting to see the multi-generational repairs on the ditches, where a place that blew out 200 years ago is a place that blows out again today. “That continuity of culture, seeing those repairs is one of the most exciting things about this system,” she said.

“All of the missions here” she told the ICOMOS visitors, “have more features than any other mission that you will see anywhere in the world in terms of being extant.”